

From hell

Rick Bartow's life and art are both works in progress



Rick Bartow works on one of his large, expressive drawings. This untitled drawing in Bartow's studio shows characteristics of much of his work: animal imagery blended with human forms and piercing, realistic eyes.

In 1965 a skinny, nervous, short-haired and naïve freshman named Rick Bartow set foot for the first time on campus of the Oregon College of Education, now Western Oregon University.

The grandson of a Wiyot Indian who came to Oregon from Northern California and settled on the coast, this young student grew up on his grandfather's homestead near Newport. He was a rough kid who liked to draw. His horizons hadn't expanded much past the misty confines of the Oregon Coast before then-art department chairman Hal Chambers awarded Bartow first prize in a youth art competition. Chambers wrote a letter inviting him to apply to the teacher's college. Bartow quickly accepted.

Even a place like Monmouth seemed a long way away from what he had known, but the young man quickly settled in to life on the rural campus. "For a small town boy, Monmouth was perfect," Bartow says. "A triumph of friendliness over size. I have never liked cities."

Flash forward four decades. Bartow, still skinny but now gray around the edges at the age of 61, still loves small towns. He is sitting in a cafe in Nye Beach, a tony district of Newport, eating a sandwich and talking about art and life. Every other person who comes into the cafe on this Sunday afternoon waves and greets him by name, and Bartow, a hawk-faced, friendly man with thick-lensed

wire-rim glasses, waves back and trades gossip.

Dressed as he is in blue jeans and sweat shirt, he might be taken as a local tradesman.

Think again.

"Rick Bartow is one of the most significant artists in Oregon," says John Olbrantz, director of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Salem's Willamette University, one of the many places Bartow has exhibited his art over the past three decades. "He blends Native American mythology with contemporary materials and techniques to create works that are at once powerful and evocative and speak to universal ideas and themes."

Bartow's evocative work has been shown around the world. He has had a solo exhibit at The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. His work has been shown in Europe and at the White House. He's been shown at the Heard Museum in Phoenix. He's been interviewed on National Public Radio.

None of this was very apparent in the early years.

After graduating from OCE with a degree in secondary art education in 1969, Bartow was drafted and sent to Vietnam as an army teletype operator. Though he never saw combat, what he

did see, in some ways, was worse. An accomplished blues guitarist – he still plays guitar every week at night spots around Newport – Bartow spent much of his war entertaining badly wounded soldiers in military hospitals.

The suffering he saw unhinged him.

"I went from napalmed babies to amputees, cut off here," he says, indicating just below his waist. "It was a bit more than I could find a big enough hole to bury it all in."

But bury it he did, with drink. By the time Bartow came back to Newport he was a roaring, antagonistic drunk, always looking for and finding trouble. His first marriage ended. He got in fights.

One morning he woke up hung over, with blood crusted in his hair after a street fight the night before, and started a new life without alcohol or drugs.

He's now been 28 years clean and sober – a path that hasn't been easy but has been rewarding. He married again, successfully, and had a son, only to lose this wife to breast cancer in 1999. He continues to battle outbreaks of anxiety and depression.

Not surprisingly, Bartow's art is rooted in suffering. His friends call him the "king of pain."

Working in a variety of media, from pastel and charcoal to acrylic and print-

To healing

ing and even sculpture, Bartow works from images of the natural world and Native mythology — think raven, bear, coyote and crow — to create a nightmarish personal geography of haunted faces and very human pain.

His best known work is the large pastels he creates, sometimes three at a time, in one of several studios he maintains near his grandfather's old homestead in South Beach, just south of Newport; there he'll tack three 6 feet by 3 feet sheets of heavy printmaking paper

A visitor to his studio winces when Bartow picks up an ordinary No. 2 pencil and starts circling points he's discussing on a finished drawing headed for his gallery, the Froelick Gallery in Portland. A bit of a showman, Bartow keeps marking on the paper, adding circles and dots almost at random as he talks. "You have to get over the idea that art is precious," he says with a mischievous grin. He's been known to tear up finished work in front of surprised audiences to make that exact point.

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to the wall and work on them simultaneously, moving from one to the other in a process that's as deeply physical as Jackson Pollock's action painting. Mirrors sit to left and right and behind as he works; he uses them to look at reflections of his drawings to check composition. Five friendly black cats prowl his studios; he calls them by name.

Bartow is less a painter than a recorder of marks, a tradition he traces back to prehistoric cave painters.

"The mark to me is so holy," he says. "It's so weird. Where in the hell does it come from? How do we decide to do it? How is it someone sees it and starts crying?"

Like those early cave painters, he loves leaving imprints of his bare hand in his work, fingers splayed. Even when drawing more conventionally, he attacks the paper brutally, smearing charcoal and pastel with the palm of his hand and wiping out entire sections of a completed image before creating it again.

Many of his drawings contain piercing, realistic eyes that sparkle and stare unsettlingly from a wild expressionistic mass of color. His work has been compared to that of expressionists like Francis Bacon or Odilon Redon.

It was Swan who talked him into becoming an artist as a real job. After he had quit drinking, he felt hyper-responsible and couldn't imagine giving up his day job for something as uncertain as art. Instead, he worked with handicapped children and as a maintenance man, bringing home a paycheck and leaving himself little energy for painting and drawing. Swan wouldn't have it.

"Teaching was a possibility," he says. "My late wife, she was a musician all the way through. And, she fought with me to become an artist." When he finally gave in, success arrived almost immediately. Portland gallery owner William Jamison began showing Bartow's drawings and paintings. Oregon artist Lilian Pitt began to mentor him. His paintings now sell for as much as \$10,000.

When he looks back at his days at OCE, what Bartow values the most is the perspective he gained from an education. "What I got out of that experience was greater than the degree," he says. "What I got was a sensitivity and an awareness. People were able to get me out into the world." ■ *Bob Keefer*

Keefer is an arts writer and painter in Creswell. His work can be seen at PaintingsofOregon.com.

After Bartow's wife Julie Swan died of cancer, he married again and has a five-year-old daughter, Lily, on whom he dotes; a drawing of hers hangs next to his in the studio.



Followed by one of his cats, Bartow walks near his studios in South Beach.